

## **Robin's Rant - where does "Mountain Running" fit in ?**

### **from Robin Bergstrand**

About a year ago, Athletics Weekly 'discovered' mountain running for a few weeks, on the back of good performances by British athletes at the World Trophy in Alaska. Those of us who have been around a while know that British athletes have always performed well over up and down courses, including winning 10 gold individual and team medals at junior and senior level. Certain individuals have also excelled at uphill only racing. What is more notable about these achievements is that 'mountain running', as practiced internationally, does not actually exist in the UK.

What we do have is fell or hill running. As we all know, this can bear little resemblance to international mountain racing, and this fact is sometimes used as an excuse why international events have no credibility, and why 'real' British fell runners have no chance of success. However, there have always been many events in the UK that require the same sort of climbing and descending ability as international events, rather than tussock or crag hopping ability. Some of the best fell and hill runners do support international events, but it appears that a majority of fell and hill runners have little or no interest in elite international competition – either in aspiring towards it or supporting those that do. I cannot think of another sport where there is this apparent 'disconnect' between the grass roots and the elite. We have a number of good road and country runners that are encouraged for various reasons to 'have a go' at mountain running, sometimes with considerable success. I find it odd that road and country runners are welcomed into the fold at grass roots level as having 'seen the light', but those that leapfrog straight to international competition are somehow made to feel less welcome in certain quarters. Finally we have literally a handful of athletes who might genuinely call themselves mountain runners. As a result they spend much of their summer training and competing overseas. Trying to bring these groups together is a small group of enthusiasts that select and assist teams for international events.

The AW coverage in 2003 focused on funding for mountain running. The recent significant reduction in funding by the AAA for the England international team has created difficulties, but in truth the England mountain team has always been one of the best funded to attend events in a sport that is generally not awash with cash. The AAA's financial problems mean that alternative sources of support for the mountain running team are being explored, but support 'in kind' is easier to find than the hard cash that is needed for travel costs etc. Funding of international activity, particularly seniors, from the FRA funds has always been a sensitive topic. This stems from the disdain felt by a body of the membership towards international events, and is fair enough in an open and democratic association such as the FRA. However, the fact is that the FRA is simply not wealthy enough to fund international activity beyond short term or stop gap measures. A decent international programme can easily consume a five figure sum per annum (excluding kit), so the future of the AAA finances, 'legacy funding' etc. is of critical importance.

However, the issue of funding to send teams to international events should be just one part of the overall picture. Developing the sport in the UK is of key importance. We need to create a sizeable body of athletes that consider themselves 'mountain runners', and whose ultimate goal is to perform well in international mountain races. At the moment we have a disparate group of athletes with different racing and training backgrounds, and different motivations and goals, which comes together once or twice a year at international mountain events. Indeed, selecting a team from such a mixed bag of contenders can be a challenge in itself. Sometimes it yields excellent results, but as is often the case with UK athletics it is more by luck than judgement. Snow, or heavy rain in my case when I won a senior medal, is not guaranteed every year. We therefore need to develop, and keep, runners with the physical and mental strength to climb and descend at speed on the typical 'alpine' style terrain over which most competitions take place. I know from personal experience that there is no reason at all why this should preclude the same athletes from running well on the UK fell scene. There is always the issue of 'domestic championships' v 'international aspirations'. This is not insoluble, but would require a change to the existing championships format (another sensitive topic).

A key element that is missing is a high profile for events in the UK that reflect international style courses. As already stated there are plenty of suitable existing events that could be developed, but the creation of new courses and competitions may be beneficial in some cases. What we need is a group of committed, capable and enthusiastic runners who identify with these events, and who compete against and push each other over these courses. We had something approaching this for a few years in the late 80's and early 90's, but once again it was more due to luck and coincidence. While that period yielded some of our best ever performances, it also yielded some of the worst. To excel at uphill only racing, runners will ultimately have to spend time overseas, but this should be an extension of a thriving domestic scene, not a stand-alone activity. We also need a group of committed and capable organizers, supporters, team managers etc. Events over the past year have clearly demonstrated that we cannot assume someone will always be there to organise races, book flights, kit or whatever. Long-term reliance on key individuals is a risky strategy, and the nurturing of new support capability is almost as important as nurturing new athletic talent.

I believe a major incentive to develop mountain running in the UK, both for athletes and governing bodies, should be the fact that mountain running presents probably the best opportunity for British athletes to achieve significant team and individual success in endurance running at world level. The African distance running nations, with no tradition of domestic mountain racing, are only starting to show interest. Eritrea's performances at the recent World Trophy confirm that they are pretty good at uphill only racing, but up and down could be a different matter. It is ironic that the main reason for their absence so far is probably the lack of money in mountain running. This may well change if and when the IAAF officially recognizes a Mountain

Running World Championship, though current word from the IAAF is that this will be further away than some might have expected. In any case we have a window of opportunity to build a foundation for success in the medium and hopefully longer term.

So to athletes, supporters and governing bodies, I suggest that it is time to review priorities, and show some commitment to a discipline that, with a bit of effort, could yield consistently good international results. The fact that the events take place in some of the most beautiful and stimulating sporting environments on the planet should make the decision a 'no brainer'.